

Short Story of the Day.

AN ADVENTURE IN THE BOTTOMLESS PIT

It was before the branch had been built to the junction. The jolly crowd which chanced together at the Colonel's had driven over from Glasgow in the great family carry-all. The old hotel at the cave never entertained a sayer party, though the venerable white-washed hostility has a history brilliant with aristocratic gavettes reaching back to the days when Henry Clay was a boy. There was a Crittenden and a Breckenridge, a Wallace and a Darnelle, a Morrison and a Lagrange, a Buckner and a Sherman to grace the Eldridge party, and the Colonel did himself proud that afternoon.

"Egad! but you are handsome, Ilma!" he burst forth enthusiastically, as he gazed in rapt admiration on the glowing face of Miss Wallace. "Charming, positively charming! Now, if I were young like Breckenridge here, I'd—do you know what I'd do, Miss Wallace?"

"I'd be a fool of yourself, papa, of course," promptly responded his pretty daughter, Nellie. "I wouldn't trust but you'd kiss her even at your age, if the rest of us weren't around."

"Gad, girl! I wouldn't trust myself, even with the whole pack of you right in sight! Eh, Ilma?" And he stepped into the center of the hall toward his favorite with a suddenness that brought a merry scream from that young lady.

"Breckenridge, where are you?" exclaimed John Crittenden, banteringly. "Isn't Col. Eldridge advancing a little within your territory? He hasn't forgotten his maneuvers at '63."

"That I haven't, my boy! It was at the battle of Missionary Ridge that I—"

But Nellie broke in on him with such a

volley of merry rallery, in which she was joined by the rest, that he was glad to retreat to the grounds outside the hotel and review his wonderful exploits of '63 in his own mind by himself.

"The Colonel would have kissed her, Breckenridge, if you hadn't been about," observed Crittenden with point. "He is as fond of her as of an old sweetheart."

"Yes!" was Breckenridge's rejoinder. A little later Miss Morrison proposed a walk down to Green river. "It's lovely there in the deep recesses of the woods," she said.

They were off at once, like fancy-free children—Miss Morrison, Miss Wallace, Crittenden and Breckenridge.

Ilma started precipitately down the steep path to the river's brink, and was forced into a run by her own momentum. She was followed in her wild frolic by Breckenridge, who was glad to get away with her thus, leaving Miss Morrison and Crittenden in the rear.

The river ran swift past the terminus of the path, and so loose was the soil in the moist, shady woods, that Ilma was not able to check her pell-mell course down the declivity by a firm foothold anywhere. Her darling slipper carried her too far. At the last step her foot slipped from under her and she pitched bodily into the treacherous stream.

A piercing scream awakened the forest echoes and brought Miss Morrison and Crittenden hurriedly to the spot. Breckenridge's coat was already off and so was his left boot. But the swift current was swifter than he and had already caught its victim in its swirl.

Crittenden did not pause in his mad

race down the steep, but plunged in. The current drew him quickly on to her and he seized her dress just as she was sinking beneath the waves and at the moment Breckenridge jumped into the water. A projecting root from a grove beech reached out a friendly hand and Crittenden grasped desperately at it and held fast. With his manly right arm he drew his precious burden to him, shifted his arm for a firmer hold about her waist, and, in a moment more, landed her and himself safe at the feet of Miss Morrison.

Breckenridge came out of the water. He turned his face away. He had not a word to say. Ilma was all gratitude. She tried her prettiest to take the will for the deed, and make both men feel that they were heroes. Crittenden's generous sentiments crushed Breckenridge more than did Miss Wallace's praise. The unlucky young man retired early, very early. He was late to breakfast next morning and late to dinner.

In the afternoon Col. Eldridge took his young friends over the short route through the cave. The adventure at the river had worn itself threadbare and was a thing of the past, almost. If Breckenridge had lost favor in the charming Miss Wallace's eyes by his one moment of hesitation she did not reveal it. She still smiled upon him.

Old Tom, the guide, had now brought the party to one of the most wonderful parts of the great cavern.

"Now, ladies and gentlemen," said Old Tom, who had been saying the same thing at the same spot for twenty-two years, "dis ain de Bottomless Pit—no bot'm to it 'all, at lead to de sah! Nobody ever find bot'm of it, no sah!"

"Why doesn't somebody go down there and explore?" queried Ilma incredulously, gazing hard into the half-lighted face of the old negro.

"What yo' talkin' about, chile! Die braves' man in de world ud nevah ventuah down da, chile!"

"There's your chance, Breckenridge," Crittenden could not refrain from remarking. The other made no rejoinder. Ilma looked reproach at the speaker.

Old Tom called the party to look down into the well-like opening yawning before them, while he sent a huge flambeau flaring down into the depths. Down, down went the torch to a interminable distance until but a faint gleam shone up from the impenetrable gloom into which the flambeau had plunged. Nellie lighted a newspaper and threw it into the Bottomless

Pit. Then one of the party dropped in a stone.

In a spirit of mischief that had not been conquered yet, Ilma suddenly snatched Breckenridge's hat and held it over the chasm. He, by an equally dexterous movement, possessed himself of something she had been carelessly carrying in her other hand.

"My letter!"

She gave a little scream and made a desperate grab to tear it from him.

"Mr. Breckenridge, if you look at that letter," she cried in alarm, "I'll never forgive you!"

Quick as a flash she made another grab at the hand which held the missive tantalizingly out of her reach above the pit. She caught it at the corner, but not tightly enough to hold it and between the two it went sailing down into the bottomless chasm.

"There! I'm glad of it!" exclaimed Ilma, trembling with excitement. "It is safe there, certainly!"

"What terrible secret did it contain?" asked Miss Morrison. "Was it your letter to—"

"Fish!" she commended in alarm and confusion.

"Suppose some daring soul should descend into that gehenna some day and peruse that precious missive, Miss Wallace," remarked Crittenden with a degree of sarcasm.

"Then he would be welcome to the secret it holds. Have you any serious objections to going down, Mr. Crittenden? It is rather deeper than Green river, I think."

"There's your opportunity, Crittenden," was the thrust Breckenridge could not withhold.

But Old Tom was calling them on to the beautiful Star Chamber, and Crittenden ignored the taunt.

Old Tom came rushing into the hotel. It was noon of the next day. Breckenridge and Miss Wallace had been missing since they retired to the respective rooms the night before. No trace of them could be found till the guide returned with Ilma's hat, which he had found at the mouth of the cave. It was positive they had ventured in alone, "which means dey am lost for good," he explained despairingly.

It was a long search in the devious lanes that led off treacherously into unexplored and endless routes. After two weary hours they came on Miss Wallace lying exhausted in an unknown chamber and with her foot sprained. Another hour and

Col. Eldridge and Old Tom appeared, carrying a body between them. It was Breckenridge, considerably bruised, but not seriously injured.

And then the story all came out. Breckenridge had started alone toward the cave at midnight. Ilma, who had lain awake with a raging headache, had got up to walk it off in the cool night air, and had silently followed the young man.

"I don't know what possessed me," said Ilma, "but I found a lantern entered the cave and kept out of sight just behind him till it flashed on me what he was up to. Then I stumbled and fell and must have fainted away. When I came to all was dark. I recalled my situation and lay listening to the most mournful cry I ever heard in my life. I knew where it came from—Mr. Breckenridge had gone down into the Bottomless Pit, but whether—"

An exclamation of terror rose from all. "Yes, sah, ladies and gentlemen," ejaculated Old Tom, "dat's wha' we foun' him—at de bot'm of de Bottomless Pit!"

It was a harrowing tale he had to tell—a dangling at the end of a long rope, a broken lantern and a fall, and then the agony of soul that follows despair while waiting a living death.

"And all for that silly letter!" cried Ilma.

There was silence all around.

"Ilma," said the Colonel, "I think that letter should be allowed to explain itself. 'I'm willing,' she responded. 'Here it is,' said the injured man throwing open his vest."

The Colonel drew the missive from the envelope and read aloud to that silent company in the ghostly light of the flickering lanterns:

"Cave Hotel, May 10, 18—
"Mr. Breckenridge—This morning you asked me to be your wife. I promised to give you an answer before tomorrow night. Tonight you let a rival save my life while you stopped to pull off your boots. When you have shown as much bravery as Mr. Crittenden, I will give you an answer. You set too high a value on your life for an ideal lover of a true Kentucky girl. Very truly yours,
"ILMA WALLACE."

There was a wedding at the Cave hotel at high noon the following day, and John Crittenden was best man and gave his rival's radiant bride the most astonishingly affectionate embrace. He could appreciate bravery as well as be brave himself. It is the way of it in Kentucky.